Fueling the Fight: USNS Kanawha Completes Strategic Deployment



May 18, 2026 | By LaShawn Sykes, Military Sealift Command

At long last, the familiar blue and yellow stripes around the top of the main smokestack appeared against the coastal sky, marking the successful completion of months of dedication and support to U.S. naval forces.

Family and friends gathered on the pier at Naval Station Norfolk, Virginia, May 16, to welcome home the crew of the USNS Kanawha. The fleet replenishment oiler and its 92 civil service mariners returned after a 204-day deployment, including 156 days actively at sea.

Operating in the U.S. 4th, 5th and 6th Fleets, the crew served as a strategic enabler. They delivered more than 17 million

gallons of fuel, 3,000 pallets of supplies and transported 45 personnel, performing 113 replenishments to 29 U.S. and coalition vessels. As a floating warehouse, the ship enabled sustained operations during key missions, including Operations Southern Spear and Epic Fury.

“I would like to thank the Kanawha crew and their families,” said Navy Capt. Elizabeth A. Nelson, Military Sealift Command Atlantic commodore. “The Kanawha was underway for seven long months supporting [the USS] Iwo Jima Amphibious Ready Group and the USS Gerald R. Ford Carrier Strike Group. Without the support of their families, they would not have been able to accomplish their mission. Kanawha’s performance exemplifies how MSC’s combat logistics force powers modern naval operations, directly fueling U.S. Navy readiness at sea.”

As part of MSC’s combat logistics force, oilers like the Kanawha are integral to the Navy’s logistics system, enabling combatant ships to remain forward-deployed to protect American interests. These logistics forces are the backbone of sustained operations at sea, and the crew who operate these ships — resupplying the fleet with fuel, stores and ammunition — are a strategic piece of Navy operations.

Replenishments at sea involve supplies being transferred from logistics force ships to combatant ships via underway replenishment. The two primary methods are connected replenishment, which transfers fuel and dry cargo via lines between ships sailing side by side, and vertical replenishment, which uses helicopters to ferry goods between the two vessels.

Extending the Navy’s operational reach across the Caribbean, Mediterranean and the Middle East, the Kanawha leveraged 19 port visits in strategic locations, including Augusta Bay, Italy; Ponce, Puerto Rico; Souda Bay, Greece; and Yambu, Saudi Arabia.

Through these port calls and ongoing logistical services, the crew acted as essential ambassadors, directly enhancing both diplomatic ties and combat readiness.

Nelson praised the Kanawha crew.

“Their MSC family owes them a debt of gratitude for their sacrifice – not just for the delivery of fuel and spare parts, but for delivering letters and packages from home that keep the fleet motivated. MSC’s [crews] are the best because they fuel the fight with more than just cargo; they fuel it with care.”

Crewed and operated by civil service mariners, the ship entered noncommissioned service with the Navy Dec. 6, 1991, to support MSC. The ship is named after the Kanawha River in southwestern West Virginia.